Helen May Martin

THE MOST AMAZING ACHIEVEMENT
IN THE HISTORY OF MUSIC TODAY

Kling, Alice

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The Most Amazing Achievement in the History of Music Study

The Remarkable Story of a Student who has been Blind and Deaf from Babyhood, yet Plays the Piano Fluently

By Alice Kling

[Editorial: *The facts in this article seemed so incredible that we refused to publish them until they could be investigated and verified by a professional musician. Therefore we asked Dr. Karol Liszniewski of the artist faculty of the Cincinnati Conservatory to visit Miss Martin and report to us. Please read his unusual letter. This probably represents the most notable triumph over giant obstacles in the history of musical art. We have had blind musicians; we have had deaf musicians; but none before with neither of these senses.*]

To The Etude:

This morning I went to see Miss Helen May Martin, the blind and deaf girl of whom you wrote in your letter of May 14th, and I do not hesitate to say that she is quite remarkable.

When I called I found her sitting at her typewriter, writing letters to different persons to thank them for the interest they took in her appearance at a musicale at the Alms Hotel here. I read some of these letters. They were written in choice English and there was not one mistake in them. Mrs. Martin whom I interviewed about her daughter said that she had used a typewriter since she was six years old.

According to the mother the girl was blind and deaf about one week after she was born—the result of a septic infection which affected both her eyes and ears. She became interested in piano playing quite early when she used to sit next the piano on which her little cousins practiced.

She seems to get some definite musical impressions and emotions through the vibrations of the tones produced on the piano. She even recognized the little *A major Prelude* of Chopin when I played it for her: I distinctly heard her say *Remembrance* (the name she has given it). She "listens" by putting her hand on the piano, and the expression of her face shows clearly signs of emotion and pleasure. If she does not like the music she withdraws her hand from the piano.

She played for me MacDowell's *To a Wild Rose,* Chopin's *Preludes in C minor* and *D flat major,* and the first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*—all with astonishing sense of rhythm and hardly any mistakes. Of course one cannot expect tone-quality and technic in a case like this. But what she does is quite extraordinary, and—here is the main point for me—apparently gives her great pleasure!

Among the pieces which she can play are the following: MacDowell *To a Wild Rose, Indian Lodge, To a Wandering Iceberg,* Chopin's *Preludes, C minor, D flat major* and *A major,* Beethoven's *Menuet* and *Moonlight Sonata,* Handel's *Largo,* Paderewski's *Menuet* and three Valses by Schubert.

Her mother converses with her in a very ingenious spelling language—by touching different fingers and other parts of her hand. The girl then answers in that wailing tone of voice so peculiar to deaf people. I could understand most of what she said.

The visit made a great impression on me. What a divine thing is music, if it can make even deaf people happy!

Karol Liszniewski.

"YOUR DAUGHTER is deaf and blind, but plays the piano? It's she who is playing now?" I asked the friendly, gray-haired woman from the second floor south apartment.

"Yes, Helen has been deaf and blind since she was a baby. The *Moonlight Sonata* that she is playing now is one of her favorites," she told me, smiling proudly. "Won't you come up for a few minutes, now that the mail's come? She's been wishing she could get acquainted with the neighbors, so I'm sure she'd be glad to see you."

Inside, at the piano, sat a slim, delicate faced girl in a pink checked house dress. With one hand she was trying out a measure of music on the keyboard and with the other tracing out the notes from a perforated page—music for the blind. She was unaware of our entrance.

"I'm telling her she has company," the mother explained as she took Helen's hand. "See, I spell out the words with my fingers into the palm of her hand."

Instantly the girl's serious, little face was all eager, and she found her way to where I stood. Then Helen May Martin shook hands silently. Shyly she touched my hair, my shoulders, the collar of my dress, the pin that fastened it at the neck—her way of seeing a stranger.

Mrs. Martin, sitting close beside her daughter so that she could speak into her hand, acted as interpreter and informant. Helen, she explained, had lost her sight when she was just a baby, and, very shortly afterward, her hearing. As she grew up she learned to articulate in the high monotone I heard her using to her mother. Though the sounds she made were indistinguishable to me, I saw that Mrs. Martin readily understood their meaning.

"She wants to know all about you at once," Mrs. Martin told me. "She's asking if you like music, if you are interested in reading and she apologizes for not being in a dressed-up dress. She has just finished dusting and straightening the dresser and was practicing till lunch time, when she is going to make a salad. You see she keeps herself busy."

When Art Triumphs over the Senses

WHEN, AT my request, her mother asked Helen to play, the girl's smile showed her pleasure, and she felt her way back to the piano. Then Helen Martin who could neither hear nor see a note played *March-Militaire* by Schubert-Tausig, Grieg's *Anitra's Dance,* a *Hungarian Rhapsody* by Liszt, and Tschaikowsky's *Barcarolle.* A half hour before I should have sworn that a deaf and blind person could never be a musician. Of course one might play, after a fashion; might drum away mechanically. But there was nothing of the amateur musician about this girl's masterful playing. There was everything of the artist about her playing Chopin's *Valse in A Minor* so reverently. To each measure she gave beauty of tone and perfect technic—to the whole, fineness of feeling and interpretation of mood.

HELEN MAY MARTIN

"How can she play like that, even play at all?" I asked.

"It's simple. Notice how she keeps her left foot pressed against the front board of the piano. In this way she gets the vibrations which give her an idea of tone quality. That enables her to put expression into the music. A wrong note causes a discord in the vibrations and she quickly corrects it. You see, she hears and enjoys music not through her ears, as you do, but through touch—that is, by means of the vibrations she receives through her foot. She listens to others play by placing her hands on the instrument."

Helen's desire to do whatever was done by her sister and by the two cousins who once lived at her home was her first incentive to learn the piano. Whatever they did Helen regarded as a game to be played along with them. When they colored geography maps for homework, Helen must color geography maps; when they modeled in clay, Helen must model in clay. When the cousins began to study music, the year Helen was seven, the latter, in her usual fashion, looked upon music lessons as a new kind of game and insisted on having a daily practice hour just as had the cousins.

Time Values Taught

WHEN Mrs. Martin saw that the new game was proving more interesting to Helen than to the cousins and that it had even become something more serious than a game, she began to teach her to play little tunes. Realizing that if Helen were to have any real understanding of what her fingers were doing on the keyboard, she must be capable of understanding the mechanics of music, she undertook to explain this aspect of music to her by the use of various objects. For instance, she taught her the time value of notes with navy beans from the sack on the pantry shelf. Four beans on an

improvised scale represented a whole note, two a half note, and one a quarter note. She found that Helen quickly grasped each idea.

After a while the deaf and blind girl could play her first piece, *Silver Threads among the Gold.*

But a new interest came into Helen's life that somewhat interrupted her piano practicing. That was school. At Olathe, Kansas, is the state school for the deaf. When Helen applied for admittance there was hesitancy about accepting her, for a student both deaf and blind had never been registered there. But, after an examination had shown her mentally alert and well-advanced in spite of her double handicap, they took her in. The special teacher assigned to her could spare her only one hour a day of instruction, but the time outside that Helen used for studying, and in five years finished the regular course for deaf students, a special course for the blind, and additional history courses. Her average grade was about 97. Of great importance to her was the fact that she had learned to read point, the blind "print." Her education was now equal to that of a student in the junior year of high school.

Through with school, Helen returned to her music. The first bit of encouragement to make a serious study of it came from a blind piano tuner and musician who made a stop in Olathe. At the music store, half of which was occupied by Mrs. Martin's millinery shop, he heard Helen play. So enthusiastic was he that he gave her four lessons. Mrs. Martin had long believed Helen was unusually talented; now urged by the piano tuner and friends who shared that opinion, she decided to provide training for her daughter. Though the recently widowed milliner could not afford to send the girl to a city conservatory, she did arrange for her study under Mrs. Abbie Jones of Olathe.

The Debut

FIVE YEARS ago Helen made her first public appearance in a church in Olathe. It happened that the music critic of the Kansas City Star had heard about the recital to be given by a deaf and blind pianist and had made the trip to Olathe to hear her. The next day Kansas read the story of Helen from the first page of the "Star." This was the real beginning of Helen's public life. From clubs and churches throughout the state came requests for recitals. After Sunday matinee at Consistory Temple at Witchita she was offered a scholarship at the local conservatory of music. For the next half year she was a student there where all others had normal sight and hearing.

Three years ago Helen moved to Chicago with her mother to continue her music. At present she is living in Cincinnati where she studies and plays occasionally in public. She spends several hours every day at the piano, learning new music and polishing old. In all she can play about a hundred numbers from memory, all classical. Some of her time she puts to making additions to her musical library. This library, which she made herself by copying New York point music from libraries in Albany, New York, Cincinnati and the Congressional at Washington, D. C., is worth about $2,000.

On other visits to Helen May Martin I learned that she is not only a musician but also a housekeeper, a typist, a student and a lover of books.

She is chief cook at her house. Once I found her in the kitchen mixing mustard, vinegar and olive oil for a salad dressing, another time beating an egg white and measuring baking powder for a cake. While she was attending the school for the deaf at Olathe she was awarded first prize in the annual bread-making contest. On cleaning days she takes pride in dusting and putting books and papers in order.

One day she showed me a United States flag she had tatted, the stars and stripes made without an imperfect stitch. She is also something of an expert at raffia work.

When Helen is not busy at the piano or in the kitchen it is likely that she is reading her books or magazines. Once I found her reading the Bible, another time chuckling over something in one of Willa Cather's stories. She subscribes to seven magazines and one weekly publication for the blind. These keep her informed on world events.

"I have sent for two new magazines that were started this year," she wrote to me once. "One is published in Los Angeles and the other in Paris. I wish I had a cottage with an attic for all my magazines, because I hate to throw them away."

All of her letters she answers herself on her typewriter. She has been able to operate a typewriter since she was about ten years old.

But it is at the piano that I found her most often, playing softly, just the shade of a smile on her serious, small face, enjoying her music more than anything else in the world.

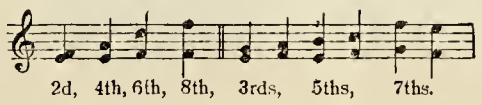
SELF-TEST QUESTIONS ON MISS KLING'S ARTICLE

1. *To what senses does music appeal?*
2. *What is the means of "listening" adopted by Miss Martin?*
3. *How may time-sense be taught, divorced from sound?*
4. *How may discord be detected by the deaf?*

Interval Reading

By HAZEL HAWKINS-DAVIDSON

IF THE interval is *even,* that is, a second, fourth, sixth or octave, one note will be on a space while the other is on a line. No line occurs between notes forming an interval of a second. Between notes making a fourth is one line, a sixth, two lines, an octave, three lines. In intervals of odd numbers, thirds, fifths, sevenths, and so forth, both notes will be either on lines or on spaces. There is one line or one space between notes making a third. Between notes forming a fifth there are two lines; a seventh, three lines. The spaces need not be reckoned with, as it is the lines which are most easily seen.



For playing intervals, shaping the hand away from the keyboard should be practiced, different finger combinations being used for each interval. When the distance for the desired interval has been estimated it should be tested at the keyboard.

"The qualities which make a musician worthy of the name and a music teacher an inspiration to his pupils cannot be measured by college degrees nor are they likely to be developed by college training. The knowledge which forms the basis of true culture can be obtained outside of a regular college course and, therefore, the student of art can dispense with a four-year course of study, at least half of which is time needlessly lost from more important musical training."—DR. FRANK DAMROSCH.

Master Discs

A DEPARTMENT OF REPRODUCED MUSIC

By PETER HUGH REED

A department dealing with Master Discs and written by a specialist. All Master Discs of educational importance will be considered regardless of makers. Correspondence relating to this column should be addressed "THE ETUDE, Dept. of Reproduced Music."

ATTENTION is called to the set of twelve discs made by the English Singers, a group of six vocalists, who sing Elizabethian songs, madrigals and carols unaccompanied, in the manner of the time in which they were written. Critical praise has been generously bestowed upon this talented group wherever they have appeared; so, too, should it be bestowed upon their records which are perfect examples of their art the beauty of which has a most enduring quality.

When we listen to the various selections which they have recorded, we are especially impressed by two things: first, the perfection of melodic and harmonic concept which seems as though it might have been written in modern times; second, the finished performances of the singers and the knowledge that they have dedicated themselves to the revival of this music culled from the "Golden Age of English Song."

These discs were recorded by the Elbert Hubbard Roycrofters, and presented to the public by Wm. A. Wise and Company. They are electrically recorded and are very commendable for their faithful reflection of the artists and their silent needle surface.

It would not be possible to enumerate here all the twenty-four selections, so we shall name only a few of them and speak of their especial qualities. (For further information write the manufacturer who will send a circular regarding the selections and the history of the singers and their art.)

One of the most "beautiful expressions of human emotion" is to be found in Orlando Gibbons' madrigal, *The Silver Swan* (written in 1612), and there is an ingenious humor in Purcell's *Three Fairies* which will delight both old and young alike. Percy Grainger's arrangement of the folk song, *Brigg Fair,* will prove more lovely upon each hearing, and the harmonic opulence of John Bennet's madrigal *All Creatures Now Are Merry Minded* (written in 1601), as well as Peter Warlock's arrangement of the old Christmas Carol, *Corpus Christi,* will always remain ineffably beautiful. Then there are the perfect arrangements made by Vaughan Williams of the carol, *We've Been Awhile A-Wandering,* and the folk-song, *Ca the Yowes,* which will present fresh delight with each replaying. One could single out many more from their many songs but it would be better to allow those who procure these discs to do this for themselves. After all, the English Singers' art will present, like all great music, personal preferences in its varying degrees of aesthetic satisfaction.

Brahms and Moy Mell

PASSING ON, we wish to present two more of the works issued by the National Gramophonic Society of London, whom we introduced to our readers' attention last month. The two that we review this month are:

Piano Quartet in C Minor, Brahms, Opus 60; played by Spencer Dyke Trio and Olive Bloom. Four twelve-inch discs.

Moy Mell, an Irish tone poem for two pianos, Arnold Bax; played by Ethel Bartlett and Rae Robertson. One twelve-inch disc.

If we begin by saying that the Brahms' work is an intellectual one, it is not our intention to imply that it is lacking in either lyrical charm or sensuous beauty. Brahms knew indeed how to combine all things. It is in truth a great work, one which presents the very heart of the composer and one which will yield its rich harvest of beauties only after many auditions. Intellectuality is stamped upon it, because, as an English reviewer remarked, three of its four movements are in the sonata form. But, to the musician and the music-lover alike, such music can only prove of an enduring appeal since it combines a beauty of emotion and thought which is organized into a perfect unity that neither loses the vitality of the first nor the depth of the latter. One listens to it as music for music's sake, says the Englishman further, because it suggests no "program." And one also listens and admires the genius of the perfect Brahms. A final word in praise of the artists should be said. Theirs is a performance excellently unified in a truly appreciative concept.

Moy Mell, or "Pleasant Plain," is one of the three ideas connected with the ancient Irish concept of the "Happy Underworld" or Pagan Paradise. The composer has praised the interpretation of this recording; so it only remains to say that his music is essentially Gaelic in character and can best be described by one's pointing out its close relationship to the literature of Yeats and Synge.

Fruit of Schubert's Centennial

THE SCHUBERT Centennial has brought forth the issue of his superb "C Major Symphony" played by the Hallé Orchestra of England. Columbia released it on seven discs (Masterwork Set No. 88). The conductor, Sir Hamilton Harty, who is a composer himself, approaches the task of interpreting this work with the thorough insight of a musician.

(*Continued on page 701*)

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